## The Great Gatsby: Three Themes in The Great Gatsby

Whilst *The Great Gatsby* explores a number of themes, none is more prevalent than that of the corruption of the American dream. The American dream is the concept that, in America, any person can be successful as long he or she is prepared to work hard and use his natural gifts.

Gatsby appears to be the embodiment of this dream—he has risen from being a poor farm boy with no prospects to being rich, having a big house, servants, and a large social circle attending his numerous functions. He has achieved all this in only a few short years, having returned from the war penniless.

On the surface, Fitgerald appears to be suggesting that, whilst wealth and all its trappings are attainable, status and position are not. Whilst Gatsby has money and possessions, he is unable to find happiness. Those who come to his home do not genuinely like Gatsby—they come for the parties, the food, the drink and the company, not for Gatsby. Furthermore, they seem to despise Gatsby, taking every opportunity to gossip about him. Many come and go without even taking the time to meet and few ever thank him for his hospitality. Even Daisy appears unable to cope with the reality of Gatsby’s lower class background. Gatsby is never truly one of the elite—his dream is just a façade.

However, Fitzgerald explores much more than the failure of the American dream—he is more deeply concerned with its total corruption. Gatsby has not achieved his wealth through honest hard work, but through bootlegging and crime. His money is not simply ‘new’ money—it is dirty money, earned through dishonesty and crime. His wealthy lifestyle is little more than a façade, as is the whole person Jay Gatsby. Gatsby has been created from the dreams of the boy James Gatz. It is not only Gatsby who is corrupt. Nick repeatedly says that he is the only honest person he knows. The story is full of lying and cheating. Even Nick is involved in this deception, helping Gatsby and Daisy in their deceit and later concealing the truth about Myrtle’s death. The society in which the novel takes place is one of moral decadence. Whether their money is inherited or earned, its inhabitant are morally decadent, living life in quest of cheap thrills and with no seeming moral purpose to their lives. Any person who attempts to move up through the social classes becomes corrupt in the process. In Gatsby’s case this corruption involves illegal activities, for Myrtle it is an abandonment of others of her own background.

A parallel theme of the book is that of love and its fleetingness. There are no stable relationships in the book. Daisy and Tom’s marriage has been damaged by affairs from early in its life. Soon after their honeymoon Tom has been caught out, when a hotel chambermaid is injured in a car crash where he is the driver. By the time the novel begins, Daisy is well aware of Tom’s regular affairs, seeming to suffer in silence until Gatsby offers her a way out. Myrtle’s relationship with Tom is no stronger, obviously based on a physical attraction, especially on the part of Tom, who has little time for Myrtle outside the bedroom. Myrtle appears to be loved by Wilson, but is unhappy in this relationship, apparently because he is unable to provide materially for her, although his actions in the latter part of the book suggest his love may be oppressive, causing her to seek escape even before the last events.

Other characters in the book are no more successful in relationships. Nick, the narrator, is unable to make commitments in his relationships. One of his reasons for coming East has been to escape a potential engagement. He has a brief affair in New York, which he ends when there are signs of commitment, and he cannot commit to Jordan either. Jordan herself has had no lasting relationship, discarding men when she has no further use for them—Nick’s rejection of her provides her with ‘a new experience.’ Partygoers are seen fighting with spouses or else attend with mistresses or lovers.

Only Gatsby seems capable of lasting love—his love for Daisy is unshaken till the end. Yet this love is unrealistic—based not only on a relationship started on a lie, but also needing a turning back of time to make it complete. At times even Gatsby himself seems to realize that the reality is not as good as his dream has been.

In the end we meet the only person capable of true love in the final chapter. It is Mr Gatz, Gatsby’s father, who has an unshaken love for his son, believing in him to the end, and blind to his failings as only a parent can be.

A third theme in the novel is that of optimism. It is Gatsby’s almost unwavering optimism that guides him through life. His belief that dreams can true has been with him since a lad, and the dream represented by the green light on Daisy’s dock holds incredible promise for him. Even when the dream starts to unravel, when Daisy’s feelings have wavered as his past is revealed, Gatsby remains optimistic. He does not take his chance to leave the area, certain that Daisy will come back to him. In this way his untimely death is merciful—his life has so long been based on a dream that Daisy’s desertion would have been crippling to him. In closing, Nick realizes that what Gatsby did not see was that his dream was already behind him—his opportunity had been missed and could not be recaptured.

**The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald's Use of the Color Green**

It is arguable that Jay Gatsby values two things above all others—love (particularly his love for Daisy Buchanon) and money (the means by which he hopes to win Daisy’s heart). The two motivations converge in Fitzgerald’s use of the color green, a symbol that represents both love and money as well as Gatsby’s ultimate goal—a spring-like renewal that would put his past behind him and plant the seeds for a future with Daisy. Fitzgerald shows green in its many incarnations, from the promise of a new bud to the decay of a stagnant pond, as Gatsby’s dream progresses from a dim light in the distance to the reality of lovely illusions left in ruins.

Our first glimpse of green in the novel comes in the first chapter, as Nick stumbles upon Gatsby with his arms outstretched toward “a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (21). The light marks the end of the Buchanons’ pier, and the beginning of Gatsby’s green hope. He stands, stares and reaches out to the light as if reaching out to Daisy herself. At this point, even with all the money and power at his disposal, he can’t directly address the object of his affection; the light represents what could have been and what could be.

By chapter 4, green takes the recognizable form of money, or at least the things money can buy. As described by Nick, the car is cream-colored and bright. The upholstery, however, the car’s center and the point at which is connects with the people inside, is a deep green, “a sort of green leather conservatory” (64). What better than a “green leather conservatory” for watching stars, particularly the bright green star across the bay? Even Gatsby’s car is a reminder of Daisy, and of her place in his universe. He buys the car to impress her if he can, and the green leather interior is a nod to decadent consumption as well as a symbol of the evolution Gatsby must undergo to make his dream a reality.

The color green’s connection to nature, growth and renewal first appears in chapter 5 as Nick prepares for Gatsby and Daisy’s rendezvous at his house. Gatsby not only sends flowers to impress Daisy, he has a “greenhouse” shipped in (84). The word “greenhouse” suggests incubation, like the love Gatsby has let incubate as he built his fortune. Having convinced Daisy to meet with him, Gatsby wants her surrounded with fresh greenery to symbolize the renewed love he hopes their interlude will inspire.

A few pages later, as Gatsby dazzles Daisy with his freshly laundered seasonal shirts, Fitzgerald slips in an apple-green one. This lighter green foreshadows a crucial light green later in the novel, and alludes to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Perhaps Fitzgerald wants us to see Daisy as an Eve figure, tempting Gatsby back in Louisville to bite the apple that led to his criminal activities, opening him up to decadence and deceit in the name of love. Also, the green of money (the expensive shirts), the green of renewal (the apple), and the green promise at the end of Daisy’s pier coincide in this brief but important scene. (92)

Immediately following the apple reference, Gatsby tells Daisy that he has been watching the light at the end of the dock. He has Daisy in his hands, literally, and he reconsiders his attachment to the light. From here the color green begins to take on a different cast as Fitzgerald shows us the underside of love, money and renewal. Compared to the physical presence of Daisy,

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever.… It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (93)

Green is no longer an enchanted color for Gatsby, and Fitzgerald’s references change accordingly. “Now it was again a green light on a dock” today might read, “Now it was nothing more than a green light on a dock.” Reality shows itself, and for that moment, the reality is what Gatsby has been seeking since his own transformation years earlier.

A flashback shows James Gatz in “a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants” (98; ch. 6), just prior to beginning his life as Jay Gatsby. The jersey is significant both because it symbolizes the green renewal Gatz experiences and because it is torn; Gatsby will pay dearly for the rebirth and wealth he seeks. From the moment his transformation takes place, the die is cast for Gatsby’s fall. Fitzgerald allows his green references to wither as well, parallel to Gatsby’s own slow demise. The cynicism typical of the Jazz Age also intrudes; the idealism that led Gatsby to remake himself for such a simple dream can’t be allowed in a world with no place for idealism, where green means only money, and the more, the better.

Tom accompanies Daisy to one of Gatsby’s parties in chapter 6. Daisy’s attitude has already changed; she tells Nick she is passing out green cards for kisses. Why are the cards green? Perhaps to celebrate her own small renewal—the beginning of a new relationship with Jay Gatsby and his fortune. Green cards suggest green paper—dollars, perhaps—and Fitzgerald seems to be saying that Daisy may be willing to trade her love for money. In the end, after all, she chooses the stability of Tom’s “old money” to Gatsby’s “new money,” in a sense preferring the security of a more comfortable faded green than the possibility of a brighter, more ambitious green.

The birth of love and the death of love can both be represented by the color green, and Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting that they are intertwined as he moves toward the end of the novel. In a brief reference in chapter 7, George Wilson, suffering from both the heat and from suspicion of his wife’s infidelity, gasses up Tom’s car. Fitzgerald tells us, “In the sunlight his face was green” (123). Wilson is literally sickened by his situation, and the destruction of his marriage cascades into the novel’s other relationships. By the end of the book, everyone’s face is figuratively as green as George’s.

George’s wife Myrtle is killed later in chapter 7, and the first thing Michaelis, the Wilsons’ neighbor, tells the police is that the “death car” is light green. Later reports suggest a blue or yellow car. Just as yellow and blue make green, Myrtle’s blood mingles with the dust in the Valley of Ashes (137).

Fitzgerald breaks green down into its component colors cleverly, possibly suggesting that the other couplings in the novel are as tainted as Myrtle’s blood in the road. This blurring takes the pinpoint of green light in chapter 1 and stretches it into a world that has no place for it, one in which the purity suggested by the light must coexist with darker forces. By Fitzgerald’s reckoning, there is no purity in the world of the Jazz Age; the green light is a symbol not only of the past, but of a past that may never have existed, both in Gatsby’s life and in American life in general.

By the novel’s final chapter, both Myrtle and Gatsby are dead, the Buchanons and Jordan have disappeared, and Nick prepares to leave as well. Before leaving, he returns to “that huge incoherent failure of a house once more” (179). He considers the place and its once-proud heritage: “I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world” (180).

Green has become a sad color for Nick and for Fitzgerald; long before Gatsby, the verdant land of Long Island represented something new and fresh, a true renewal. Once the desire for other “green,” particularly money, came into the mix, Fitzgerald suggests the possibility for purity and rebirth, and finally love, prove unattainable.

In the last paragraph of the novel, as in chapter 1, the green light appears, bringing the symbolism full circle. Nick says Gatsby “believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us” (180). With the events of the novel behind him, Nick reiterates the fact that the light Gatsby counted on and followed was, as Gatsby saw in chapter 5, no more than a green light. Gatsby invests a great deal of hope and love in the color green throughout the novel; at the end green is simply green, as magical and powerful as Gatsby’s apple-green shirts, which can’t hold Daisy’s interest long enough to make her stay.

Fitzgerald’s use of the color green in *The Great Gatsby* reflects the arc of Gatsby’s dream—in the beginning it is fresh, bursting with desire and imagination as if his dream were a newly blossoming flower. As reality sets in—the irritants of attitude and deceit and the collision of damaged lives—the green fades, or it weathers like a sick face. Finally, the same bright green of the past becomes no more than a memory, and not necessarily a clear one.

Gatsby’s green hope rests on the light at the end of Daisy’s dock more than the reality of Daisy, past or present. She proves herself to be not the fulfillment of his dream, but as elusive and uncertain as the flickering green glow barely visible across an expanse of water. Gatsby dies pursuing that light, blinding himself to the other colors that exist all around him.

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## The Great Gatsby: The Theme of Time in The Great Gatsby

Time is one of the most pervasive themes in *The Great Gatsby*, weaving between characters and situations, slowing and speeding the action until the entire novel seems almost dreamlike. Fitzgerald not only manipulates time in the novel, he refers to time repeatedly to reinforce the idea that time is a driving force not only for the 1920s, a period of great change, but for America itself. We will see Fitzgerald also turns a critical eye to the American concept of time, in effect warning us all to avoid becoming trapped in time.

**The Past**  
Fitzgerald strongly connects time in the novel with location, as if time were an entire setting in itself. Fitzgerald tips his hand early; after Nick provides a description of himself and what we assume are his motives in coming to New York, he makes an immediately important time reference: “Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening I drove over there to have dinner with the Tom Buchanans” (5; ch. 1)

Nick wants to relate the “history” of the summer, not its events, its characters, or “just” a story. This is to be a history, events frozen in time and examined and re-examined. Nick sets the stage for the novel’s treatment of time—despite the often frivolous characters and situations, this story bears more than a superficial reading. The Eggs gain enough historical importance to rival New York City itself. Fitzgerald shrinks his focus to a geographical area while simultaneously expanding its meaning in time.

The past plays a major role, perhaps the most major role, in the concept of time presented in Gatsby. Tom was a “Big Man on Campus” in the past, while Gatsby was both a poor farm boy and Daisy’s lover; Daisy was a flighty socialite with no family to tie her down; all of them were naïve Midwesterners whose lives, they now believe, were far better in a past they can’t help but romanticize. It is precisely this romanticizing of the past that enables Fitzgerald to write such a powerful novel—in allowing his characters to wallow around in their pasts, he reminds later generations of readers that neither the 20s nor his books should be romanticized. They should be taken for what they are, and made relative to the present day. The (possibly unintentional) consequence of this attitude is an audience that extends beyond the twentieth century.

**Characters**  
Fitzgerald’s characters are not only obsessed with time, they seem to embody it. Tom Buchanan is obsessed with history, reading books like “The Rise of the Colored Empires” that offer historical explanations for his inability to rise above the life he lives. Tom is Old Money, hopelessly stuck in the past, trying to live up to his ancestors’ wealth by amassing his own. He can never recapture his youth, so he seeks to recreate the excitement of those days by having a mistress on the side.

Daisy, too, is stuck in the past, a pre-feminist remnant of an age in which women were expected to act “a certain way.” She tolerates Tom’s affair, and stands out in stark contrast to Jordan Baker’s contemporary “flapper” persona. Daisy is as confined as Jordan is liberated, and she can’t live a life without a man to run it for her. Her true complication comes when two opposite aspects of her past—Tom and Gatsby—compete for her affection. In each, she sees qualities lacking in the other. For a woman who is defined by men, her own definition of herself comes into question.

Myrtle Wilson seems to have a fairly solid definition of herself, and she and her husband George are fully in the present. Living in the Valley of Ashes, they can’t help but see the world as it is, as it goes by the windows of their garage. Myrtle is usually willing to put up with the complications of seeing a married man in exchange for the material possessions George can’t give her. However, when she complains in her “secret” apartment in the city, the past literally smacks her in the face. Presumably, George would never do that to her, devoted as he is. That devotion, and the reality of his situation, causes George to snap at the end of the novel.

Gatsby, of course, the victim of George’s misplaced rage, represents the future. His past is colorless and best forgotten; James Gatz got to where he is in the beginning of the novel by focusing on the future and building toward it, by any means necessary. He desperately wants to make Daisy part of his future (He is, after all, building it to share with her, which hopelessly entangles his past with his future.), but she can’t commit to his far-reaching vision. Gatsby’s world falls apart when he realizes the future he envisions simply can’t happen.

Nick’s progression as a narrator provides a yardstick by which the other characters’ relationships to time can be measured. In the beginning, he is purely a product of his Midwestern past; by the time he acclimates himself to New York and meets Myrtle Wilson, he is very much in the present. At the end of the novel, Nick must reconcile his own future by returning to the site of his naïve past a wiser, more jaded person. Nick, in this sense, shares all the other characters’ perspectives of time, allowing us to watch time unfold.

**Images**  
Fitzgerald uses a number of repeated images to represent time in Gatsby; one of the most telling is the clock in chapter 5. Gatsby and Daisy are meeting at Nick’s house for the first time, and the three are sharing an awkward conversation:

Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy, who was sitting, frightened but graceful, on the edge of a stiff chair.

“We've met before,” muttered Gatsby. His eyes glanced momentarily at me, and his lips parted with an abortive attempt at a laugh. Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers, and set it back in place. Then he sat down, rigidly, his elbow on the arm of the sofa and his chin in his hand.

“I'm sorry about the clock,” he said.

My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn't muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head.

“It's an old clock,” I told them idiotically.

I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor. (86-87)

The clock is a symbol of many things—Gatsby’s dream of having Daisy for himself, Daisy’s hope for a better life, Nick’s desire for the dramatic change that never comes, or even just their lives slowly ticking away. When Gatsby almost breaks it, the moment is shattered. None of the three characters will be the same again after the clock drops. Gatsby becomes uncharacteristically clumsy around Daisy, who has no idea what to say or do. Nick, too, is at a loss, coming up with something “idiotic” to say just to keep the conversation moving. The last line, though, foreshadows the ending of the novel: “I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor.” In this one moment, past, present and future all seem to meet and crash together in an impossible explosion of emotion and loss. From here, all is downhill.

In a very important sense, *The Great Gatsby* is all about time—its effects on people, its importance in our lives, and most particularly its status in the American consciousness. We see time in a linear fashion—broken up into discrete units for appointments, life plans, meetings and goals. Fitzgerald shows us lives all along that line, perhaps suggesting that the most successful American life is one that should see time in more flexible terms. As such, Nick may be seen as the only true successful character in the novel, as he is able to move across the various timelines, interact with the characters who inhabit them, and retain his sense of self in the end. Nick, as it turns out, is not a slave to time. Fitzgerald seems to be encouraging his readers to break their own chains and take the time to enjoy the lives they have while they have them.

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## The Great Gatsby: The American Dream

The ideal of the American Dream is based on the fantasy that an individual can achieve success regardless of family history, race, or religion simply by working hard enough. Frequently, “success” is equated with the fortune that the independent, self-reliant individual can win. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald examines and critiques Jay Gatsby’s particular vision of the 1920s American Dream. Though Fitzgerald himself is associated with the excesses of the “Roaring Twenties,” he is also an astute social critic whose novel does more to detail society’s failure to fulfill its potential than it does to glamorize the “Jazz Age.”

As a self-proclaimed “tale of the West,” the novel explores questions about America and the varieties of the American Dream. In this respect, *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps that legendary opus, the “Great American Novel”—following in the footsteps of Herman Melville’s [Moby Dick](http://www.enotes.com/mobydick) and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. As a novel that has much to say about faith, belief, and illusion, it merits being considered alongside works like T. S. Eliot’s [The Waste Land](http://www.enotes.com/waste-land), which explores the “hollowness” lying below the surface of modern life. It is possible to regard Gatsby as an archetypal tragic figure, the epitome of idealism and innocence who strives for order, purpose and meaning in a chaotic world. Fitzgerald introduces the theme of underlying chaos early in the novel when the violent Tom Buchanan declares, “‘Civilization’s going to pieces’” (12; ch. 1).

Although Fitzgerald is sketchy about the details of Gatsby’s meteoric rise, the reader does know that he was a poor boy from the midwest without inherited wealth or family connections who succeeded in obtaining an elaborate house in West Egg from where he stages lavish, catered parties for people he doesn’t know. With wealth comes the opportunity to reinvent his identity, inspired primarily by a “single green light, minute and far away” (21; ch. 1): this is the house of Daisy Fay Buchanan, the very wealthy, former Louisville belle whom Gatsby had loved before the war but who marries the immensely wealthy Tom Buchanan of Chicago.

All that matters for Gatsby is the future: achieving his goal of reclaiming Daisy. That is part of the power of the American Dream—the irrelevance of the past. A fabricated history is just as useful as a truthful history. So Gatsby constructs grandiose lies that he doesn’t even bother to cloak in a shred of reality. For instance, when he decides to convince Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator, that he isn’t a “nobody,” Gatsby casually mentions that he’s the “‘son of some wealthy people in the Middle West … but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years’” (65; ch. 4).

When Nick, who is indeed from the Middle West, inquires “‘What part?’” Gatsby is reduced to the geographically hysterical lie: “‘San Francisco.’” Later in the novel, the reader learns that far from being educated at Oxford as part of a family tradition, Gatsby’s brief stint there was part of a program for American soldiers following World War I. As Nick observes, Gatsby gives new meaning to the phrase “the self-made man”: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (98; ch. 6).

The idealism evident in Gatsby’s constant aspirations helps define what Fitzgerald saw as the basis for the American Character. Certainly Gatsby is a firm believer in the American Dream of self-made success: he has not only self-promoted an entire new persona for himself, but he has also succeeded both financially and , at least ostensibly, socially. Yet the Dream which offers Gatsby the chance to “suck on the pap of life” (110; ch. 6) forces him to climb to a solitary place, isolated and alienated from the rest of society. In the midst of the drunken revelers at his party, Gatsby is “standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes” (50; ch. 3) At the end of the novel, Gatsby will also be practically alone at his own funeral.

Gatsby’s primary ideological shortcoming is that he makes Daisy Buchanan the sole focus of his belief in the orgastic future. His previously varied aspirations (evidenced by the book Gatsby’s father shows Nick detailing his son’s resolutions to improved himself) are sacrificed to Gatsby’s single-minded obsession with Daisy. Even Gatsby realized when he first kissed Daisy that once he “forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (110; ch. 6). Finally five years later, Gatsby reunites with Daisy, takes her on a tour of his ostentatious mansion, and pathetically displays his collection of British-made shirts. Significantly, that much longed-for afternoon produces not bliss but disappointment.

As Nick observes:

As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. (95; ch. 5)

As the novel unfolds, Gatsby seems to realize that—as he did with his own persona—he has created an ideal for Daisy to live up to. He remains firmly committed to her, even after her careless driving has caused Myrtle Wilson’s death. Only his own needless death at the hands of the distraught Mr. Wilson (led by Tom Buchanan to believe that Gatsby has killed Myrtle) ends Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy.

What Fitzgerald seems to be criticizing in *The Great Gatsby* is not the American Dream itself but the corruption of the American Dream. What was once for leaders like [Thomas Jefferson](http://www.enotes.com/topics/thomas-jefferson) a belief in self-reliance and hard work has become what Nick Carraway calls “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (98; ch. 6). The energy that might have gone into the pursuit of noble goals has been channeled into the pursuit of power and pleasure, and a very showy, but ultimately empty, form of success.

Gatsby’s dream can be identified with America herself with its emphasis on the inherent goodness within people, youth, vitality, and a magnanimous openness to life itself. With the destruction of Gatsby, we witness a possible destiny of America herself. Critic Matthew J. Bruccoli, writing in Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters, quotes a letter written by Fitzgerald while composing Gatsby: “That’s the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory.”

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